Bangladeshi Graduates' Required Language Skills and Acquired Proficiency in English: Professional Ability and Skill Attributes

M S Arifeen, M.A. and Abu Sufian Yunus, BBA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the proficiency in English of Bangladeshi graduates. A questionnaire was developed and administered to 171 students. This survey, through the use of a self-report questionnaire, provided an important opportunity to capture crucial data from students regarding their English language skills. Findings of this study revealed that the students' frequency or ability of using the English language was low, irrespective of the type of workplace or level of study. Analyses of skill deficiencies revealed wide learning gaps between the acquired and required English skill attributes. Analysis of the survey data had also identified a list of important skill attributes in the workplace, and the four most highly valued

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English skill attributes were a combination of academic and specific job-related tasks: understanding technical documents, correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure, writing test/investigation report and questioning for clarification.

Keywords: *Bangladeshi Graduates, Proficiency in English, Professional ability and Skill attributes*

Introduction

It is a well-known fact among linguists that non-native speakers of English have come to outnumber native speakers of English, as has, for example, been pointed out by Crystal (2003). Equally well-known is the fact that English may well be called the language of international business these days, and that English skills have become a basic requirement for almost any professional wishing to engage in our ever more globalized business world. However, not everyone involved in international business is a native speaker of English.

Graddol (2006) emphasizes this function of English in his report to the British Council, *English Next,* when he stresses the increasingly important role that English is now playing in *economic processes*, in providing access to the kind of *global knowledge* available in English and the jobs which involve *contact with customers and colleagues for whom English is the only shared language* [italics added]. (p. 38)

It is, therefore, not surprising that English as a *lingua franca* (henceforth ELF) is currently the most common use of English world-wide. As the Web site of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) project states: Millions of speakers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds use ELF on a daily basis, routinely and successfully, in their professional, academic and personal lives. (VOICE Web site, n.d., FAQ). This widespread use of English as a *lingua franca* also has implications for research in the field of professional communication. Charles (2007), for instance, observes that "arguably, more international business is actually done in English between NNSs than between NSs" (p. 262). Nevertheless, empirical research on how English is used as a lingua franca in workplace settings is still scarce.

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This trend contributes to a talent gap in this global workforce, particularly as it relates to speaking the lingua franca of business. Companies around the world are trying to recruit and retain younger employees to replace older workers who will be retiring over the next several years. But, according to the McKinsey Global Institute, "Only 13% of university graduates from emerging or low-wage countries are suitable for employment in multinational companies, and the primary reason cited is lack of English skills."

Thus, professional communication in English has been identified as essential workplace tools for success in profession and has been correlated with career success and increased in financial rewards. English learners urgently need to be sensitized to communicative strategies for establishing relationships and maintaining rapport in the workplace (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Forey & Nunan, 2002). Notwithstanding, there is a global concern regarding the widening gap between the communication skills in English of entry-level job applicants and the English language competency required for entry-level employment.

Background

Academics and the government and non-government organizations have expressed their concern over the deteriorating level of English proficiency among the students in universities. In ranking the importance of the skills, students ranked speaking as their least competent skill and regarded speaking and writing as the most important skills needed at professional level as well as to master the language. Regarding the reading habits of students in Bangladesh, 80 % of university students are *reluctant readers of English language materials*. In addition studies also highlighted the importance of English for informal interaction and socializing in workforce contexts.

Tong (2003) in a study on identifying essential learning skills in students' … education stated that the majority of employers expressed dissatisfaction with students' communication abilities. This ranged from failure in both written and oral communication skills to presentation and other work-specific communication skills such as informal discussions, public speeches and

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interviews. According to Riemer (2002), the concept of English for Special Purposes (ESP), will achieve more in the education of … students by focusing on the learner's attention on the particular terminology and communication skills required in the workplace.

In Bangladesh Agricultural University education system, English is taught for one semester as an integrated subject. The course content for English prepares students with study skill, information processing skill, reading skill, and oral communication skill. Other skills in English modules are report writing, and job hunting. In addition, a certificate course on Communicative English is also offered from the Department of Languages.

Required Skills in English

Employability skills of fresh graduates have constantly received considerable attention in the local media. Lack of English language proficiency has often been cited as one of the major factors contributing to graduate unemployment (Sharif, 2005). Jawhar (2002) stated that in the private sector, graduates are becoming unemployable as a result of lack of proficiency in the English language.

Euromonitor carried out a survey on employers in relevant industries to gauge whether graduates are meeting industry needs. In view of the significance of this matter, a research was conducted to investigate (1) the industry needs for graduates who are competent in English and (2) the level of competency required for employment.

For this, data from different types of business/ professional organisations were gathered based on a survey, a series of semi-structured interviews, and a seminar (Table 1). The highest number of respondents was from education sector, IT & telecommunication, Finance & Bankingthe Manufacturing and Industrial industry sector (n=77, 62, 55, 52) respectively, while the lowest number of participants was from the health services sector (n=3).

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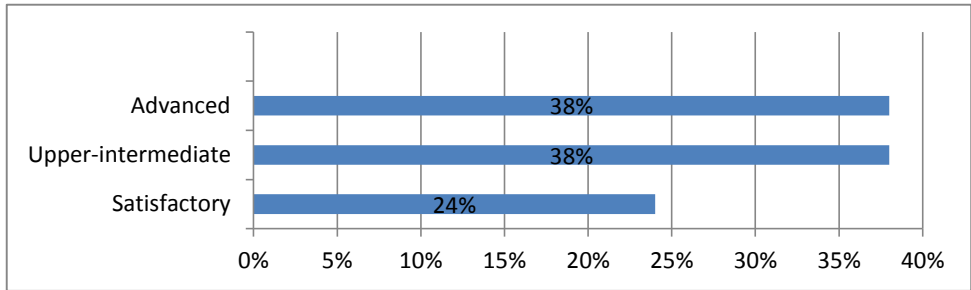
Figure1. Required level of Language proficiency (Euromonitor, 2010)

This was essential because if the status persists, the existing gap between the English language competency of university graduates and the English language competency required by the industry will continue to widen the issue of unemployable graduates and the situation will be exacerbated.

Let there be no mistake: the use of an international language such as English is indispensable for the efficient handling of international affairs, broadly defined. However, it seems that the infallibility of English as a universal panacea to problems of cross-cultural problems has been greatly exaggerated. [...] As long as the lingua franca is used in a mechanical (and culturally impoverished) way, with limited vocabulary, narrowly defined according to clearly understood conventions, then international business - commercial, scientific, technical - can be efficiently conducted. [...] For rich and intimate communication on complex, important issues something more is needed. [...] The solution is [...] the acquisition of several foreign languages, indeed the celebration of multilingualism. (Cohen 2001:89-91)

Table 1

	Types of Companies Contacted
Multinational Industries	Manufacturing & Industrial, IT and telecommunications, financial/ banking, Public services, pharmaceuticals & Healthcare, services, Constructions & Property development, energy, chemical
Job Advertisement in	Conducted a snapshot of the printed and online job

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newspaper or online	advertisements for positions that required English
Education	10 universities interviewed, including six public and four private universities
Recruitment Agencies	10 recruitment agencies

Source: Euromonitor International (based on interviews with companies, recruitment agencies, educational sector, and government bodies in 2010)

Objectives

All over the globe including Bangladesh, people are clamoring to learn English. Academics have no dispute with the view that English Language is related to success in career. Shanta Nair-Venugopal (2000), in an article titled, 'English, identity and workplace' has found out that English is increasingly important in the workplace. Mahmoud A. Al-Khatib, (2005) attempted to examine the communication needs of the personnel in the workplace by seeking their opinions on their perception of what constituted English which is deemed adequate to the workplace.

This study set out (1) to identify the English proficiency of graduates (i.e., in terms of their frequency of application, satisfaction on their ability and perceptions regarding their acquired and required proficiencies); (2) to determine the importance of different English skill attributes needed on the job for students; and (3) to bring out the gaps between the acquired and required skill attributes as perceived by the students.

Methodology

Design

This study used a quantitative, descriptive design where data was collected to assess the English proficiency of BAU graduates. A survey instrument was designed specifically for this study. The instrument used comprised of demographic variables and four English proficiency

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components. These components were frequency of usage, satisfaction on ability and the acquired and required proficiencies.

Population and Data Collection Procedure

This study involved 171 graduate students from Bangladesh Agricultural University (of whom 97 graduates had only English Language Course at Undergraduate level & 74 students had English Language Course at Undergraduate level as well as one additional Certificate Course on English Language. These students had completed a mandatory one-semester language course. The students were briefed on the purpose of the study and instruction was given on how to respond to the questionnaire.

Instrumentation

Items in the survey instrument was designed based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other literatures, initiated in 2000 by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to assess students across a range of skills required for a variety of tasks that the students have to perform. The domains for this study (*reading, writing and speaking*) were adapted from the SCANS report on skills that were required to enter the workplace successfully.

The instrument was divided into four parts. Part A was on the demography of respondent (sex, age, and types of language courses attended). Part B assessed the students' perception on the *frequency* of the usage of the English language during their study and a Likert-type scale was used with four choices (not use at all, used infrequently, used frequently, used very frequently). Part C assessed the students' perception on their *ability* to use the English language during their study/ course. A Likert-type scale was used with four choices (not at all satisfied, not satisfied, satisfied, very satisfied). Part D assessed the students' perceptions of their acquired and required English proficiency. Four choices (not competent, slightly competent, competent and very competent) were used to rate the students' perception of their acquired skills and another four choices (not needed, not really needed, needed and essential) were used to rate the students' perceptions of required skills.

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Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal reliability of the survey instrument which consisted of a thirty-six items scale. The instrument was tested in its entirety and the four individual sub-sections of the survey were tested independently. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the individual sections of the survey ranged from a low of 0.727 to a high of 0.928. These results indicated moderate to high levels of internal reliability.

To test for construct validity, factor analysis was employed to determine whether the items could be classified into different categories. Four subscales and 36 items were originally developed for the questionnaire and, after factor analysis, the same four subscales and 36 items remained. All items have a loading of more than 0.4 on their *a priori* scale and no other scale. The percentage of variance ranges from 45.178 to 66.657 for different scales. The factor analysis of the items from the four subscales confirmed the factor structure of the questionnaire and these were operationalized as: frequency of usage, ability, acquired skill, and required skill.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS) was used for analyzing the data. Statistical analyses were used to investigate the differences on the frequency of the application of the English language based on the type of training provider. The differences in the students' ability to use the English language were also statistically analyzed based on their study levels. Further statistical analyses were used to investigate the differences between the students' acquired and required English skills.

Results and Discussions

Demographic Analysis

Demographic data collected on student participations included name, age, gender, and English language achievement at Level-1 Semester-1/2 final examination. The English language achievement at Level-1 Semester-1/2 final examination was classified into 5 categories and 2 categories for certificate course. 75% and 60% of the respondents obtained grades B and GOOD in certificate course for performance respectively for their English language subject (Table 2).

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Table 2. English Language Achievement

	English Language Grade									
English Language Course at Undergraduate study	A$^+$	A	A$^-$	B$^+$	B	B$^-$	C	D	F	Total
	0	3	5	34	22	16	11	4	0	95
English Language Course at Undergraduate study + Additional Certificate Course	Good				Satisfactory					
	44				30					74
									Total	169

Note: Respondents (n = 171) but 2 students did not state English grade

Descriptive Statistics

Frequency of the Usage of English Language (oral, reading and writing skills) was compared between students.

Table 3. Frequency of Usage of English

	Type of Courses	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
English Frequency	English Language Course at Undergraduate study	74	2.14	0.471
	English Language Course at Undergraduate study + Additional Certificate Course	97	2.15	0.409

The results (Table 3) indicated that students' use of English was more or less the same, irrespective of the types of courses i.e. (M = 2.14, SD = 0.471); (M = 2.15, SD = 0.409). The mean 'frequency of usage' score of slightly more than 2.0 showed that students' usage of the language was not very frequent. This could be attributed to several factors: a) students' inability to communicate effectively, thus avoiding the used of the language on a regular basis, b) the training organization's main language of communication and its attitude towards the English language, and c) a combination of the above two factors. It is difficult to reach a firm conclusion

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regarding this finding since no information was gathered with respect to the training organization's language preference when communicating with the trainees. However, this finding supports the results of previous studies (Kaur & Thiyagararajah; 1999; Othman, 2005; Pawanchik, 2006) regarding students' ability and confidence in using the English language at the workplace. 4.2.2 Students' Ability to use the English Language The students' perceived ability in using the English language was compared between certificate and diploma-level students.

*Table 4. Ability in English Language

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Language Courses Attended				
English Ability	English Language Course	74	2.14	0.426
	English Language Course+ Additional Certificate Course	97	2.20	0.418

The results (Table 4) indicated that the students' perceived ability in using the English language was higher (M = 2.20, SD = 0.418) than their counterparts (M = 2.14, SD = 0.426). However, the mean scores of less than 3 for both students indicated that the majority of students were not satisfied with their ability in the language.

Students' Acquired and Required English Proficiency The students' acquired and required English proficiency skills were compared to investigate the skill gaps and deficiencies.

*Table 5. English Skill Attributes (n = 171)

Skill Attributes	Acquired Skill		Required Skill	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Oral	2.19	0.406	3.42	0.430
Reading	2.54	0.457	3.49	0.525
Writing	2.34	0.457	3.48	0.438

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Based on the results of Table 5, this study showed that there were skills gaps between the acquired and required oral, reading and writing skills. The mean 'acquired' score of less than 3.0 indicated that the students were still not competent in the three domains of the language, i.e., oral, reading and writing skills. Thus, BAU educators and curriculum developers may like to examine this gap-in-skill deficiency and accordingly address this issue in the current syllabus.

The Rank Order of Required Skills the students' perceived required skills were further investigated by ranking them in the order of importance (Table 6).

*Table 6. The Rank Order of 'Required' English Proficiency Level of Requirement (%)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4	Rank
Understand technical document	3.63	0.583	0	5.3	26.3	68.4	1
Write with correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure	3.59	0.639	1.2	4.7	28.1	66.1	2
Write test/investigation report	3.58	0.622	0.6	5.3	29.8	64.3	3
Questioning for clarification	3.48	0.608	0.6	4.1	41.5	53.2	4
Write official document	3.47	0.577	0	4.1	44.4	51.5	5
Write work summary	3.47	0.587	0	4.7	43.9	51.5	5
Understand work schedule	3.46	0.662	1.8	4.1	40.9	53.2	7
Explain technical terms orally	3.46	0.576	0	4.1	46.2	49.7	7
Explain technical terms in written form	3.43	0.604	0	5.8	45.0	49.1	9
Express opinion, ideas etc.	3.42	0.611	0	6.4	45.6	48.0	10
Understand written instructions	3.39	0.699	1.2	8.8	39.2	50.3	11
Official/Public Talk	3.35	0.618	0.6	5.8	51.5	42.1	12
Write incident/accident report	3.33	0.686	0.6	10.5	43.9	45.0	13

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Level of requirement (4-point Likert-type scale): 1 = Not needed, 2 = Not really needed, 3 = Needed, 4 = Essential

From Table 6, the skill of 'understanding technical document' was the top important skill, where 68.4 % of students rated 'understand technical document' as essential. The second top ranked skill was 'correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure' where 66.1% of students rated as essential. The third important skill was 'writing test/investigation report' where 64.3 % of students rated it as essential. However, the difference in mean scores between the second and third ranked skill attributes was very small (0.01 %). The skills of 'writing official document' and 'writing work summary' were both ranked fifth based on the same mean scores and the same percentage of students (51.5 %) that viewed 'writing official document' and "writing work summary' as essential.
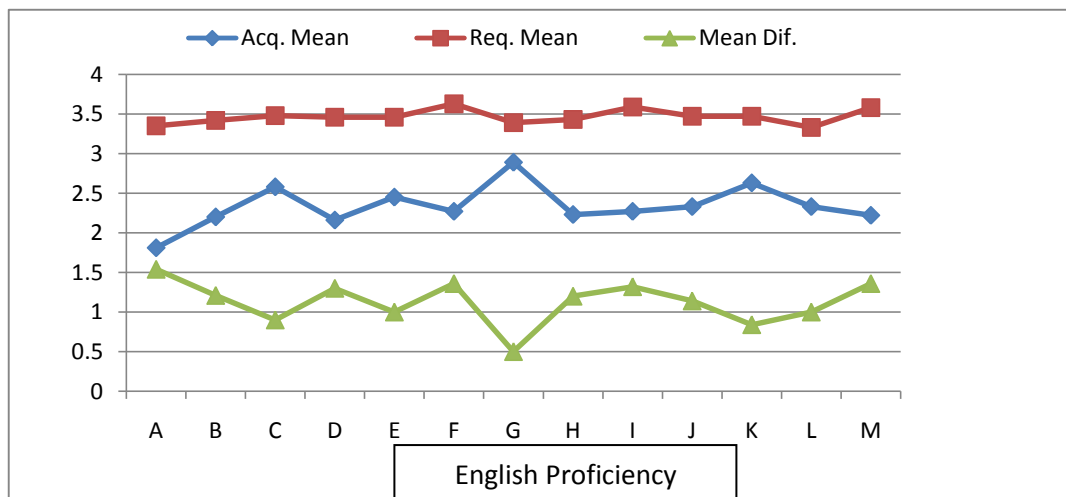
The skill attributes of 'write official document' and 'write work summary' had the same mean score (3.47). Similarly, the skill attributes of 'explain technical terms orally' and 'understand work schedule' also had the same score (3.46). The difference in the mean scores is illustrated in Figure 1. The ranking of *understanding technical document* as the most required English proficiency skill demonstrated the importance of introducing particular (technical) English workplace terminologies as recommended by Riemer (2002). The 'writing incident/accident report' skill was ranked last by the students where only forty five percent (45 %) of students rated it as essential. Although the five skills of 'explain technical terms in written form', 'express opinion/ideas', 'write official document', 'understand written instructions', 'official/public talk' and 'write incident/accident report 'were perceived to be the least important, the mean scores were still higher than 3.0. This was due to the fact that less than twenty percent of respondents viewed these skills as 'not needed' or 'not really needed'. As illustrated in Table 6, above eighty percent (80 %) of the respondents rated all thirteen skills as 'needed' and 'essential'. 4.2.5 Skills Gaps Analysis The gaps between the acquired and required skill attributes were further investigated to determine the magnitude of skill deficiency.

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*Table 7. Skill Attributes and Mean Scores

Label	Skill Attributes	Mean Acquired	Mean Required	Mean Difference
A	Presentation (Official/Public Talk)	1.81	3.35	1.54
B	Expressing Ideas/Opinion	2.20	3.42	1.21
C	Questioning for clarification	2.58	3.48	0.90
D	Explaining Technical Terms Orally	2.16	3.46	1.30
E	Understanding Work Schedule	2.45	3.46	1.00
F	Understanding Technical Document	2.27	3.63	1.36
G	Understanding Written Instructions	2.89	3.39	0.50
H	Explaining Technical Terms in Written Form	2.23	3.43	1.20
I	Correct Grammar & Vocabulary (Writing)	2.27	3.59	1.32
J	Writing Official Document	2.33	3.47	1.14
K	Writing Work Summary	2.63	3.47	0.84
L	Writing Incident/Accident Report	2.33	3.33	1.00
M	Writing Test/Investigation Report	2.22	3.58	1.36

*Figure 2. Skills Gaps between Acquired and Required English Skills Attributes

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Table 7 and Figure 2 illustrated the difference in the mean scores of the required and acquired skills. The mean scores of the required skills would indicate the importance of those skills, whilst the mean scores of acquired skills would indicate the (actual) performance using those skills. From Figure 1, the three most significant skill gaps between the required and acquired English proficiency were: presentation skills (official/public talk), understanding technical document, and writing test/investigation report). These three skills were ranked 12th, 1st and 3rd respectively, in the order of importance (Table 6). In contrast, the three least significant skill gaps were: understanding written instructions (ranked 11th), writing work summary (5th), and questioning for clarification (4th). Revisiting Table 6, presentation skill was ranked second last in order of importance. It is difficult to explain the discrepancy between the ranking order and skill gap of the presentation skill (official/public talk).

Conclusions & Suggestions

Creating a workforce skilled in Professional English requires something different from typical English language training. However, certainly the content and pedagogy of the training needs to be extremely powerful and based on the latest research. Beyond providing training for core skills improvement, they should focus on real-life Professional situations, reference common communication vehicles such as email and include tools to support employees' ongoing communication needs during the work day. Since, the study revealed that the students' frequency and ability of using the English language were low, irrespective of the type of workplace or level of study. The students' self-reports of their actual verbal, reading, and writing skills being lower than the corresponding required skills indicate that they have yet to master the skill attributes commonly needed at the workplace. The students' ranking of the English language skill attributes show that job-related tasks such as *understanding technical documents* and *writing test or investigation report* are regarded highly at the workplace.

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